

The “Inner Eyes” of Philosophical Skepticism

Nassim Noroozi

McGill University

In an insightful attempt to specify relations among certain varieties of philosophical skepticism in “Philosophical Skepticism, Racial Justice, and US Education Policy,” Derek Gottlieb observes the legacy of Descartes’ skepticism about the capacity of other minds not just in colonial normative establishments (for example, hierarchies about what constitutes the “ideal human”), but also in attempts to provide correctives to those established norms (namely in educational policies that aim to provide correctives and substantive equality).

Gottlieb’s section titled “What I Mean by Skepticism” comprises the theoretical scaffold for the hypothesis of the paper and sculpts the subsequent analytical trajectory for critiquing the harm of Cartesian doubt as well as the correctives to overcome such harm especially as they extend to educational policies. This section is a fundamental part of the paper as it essentially determines the type of possibilities and horizons for thinking and theorizing for overcoming racial injustice. Philosophical skepticism (I have to interject: *Western* Philosophical Skepticism) is seen as having two forms; academic and Pyrrhonian, with the academic one—nourished by Cartesian doubt—having formed the trope for modern science.

In Gottlieb’s paper the material grounds for the critique of academic skepticism is comprised of Strauss’ idea of academic skepticism being “industrious,” and Wittgenstein’s worry about how efforts to solve it continue its work of denial.¹ Taylor’s diagnostic is also a pillar in Gottlieb’s paper to rely on. Radical doubt originally held emancipatory promises of rigour by allowing us to sift our knowledge to rid it from irrationality and provided grounds for freedom from tyrannical abuses; however, the “ontologization of skepticism” is where the project went wrong. Subsequently, the ensued fundamental estrangement as a result of perceiving the world through the prism of “a subject and an external world” turned the ethos of skepticism to “an enamour with separating subjects and objects,” and consequently to perceiving subjects-as-objects.

Gottlieb suggests that the same pattern appears in US policies that aim to overcome racial disparities and discusses how correctives are premised on

decades of sociological research instead of analyzing the effects of the harm that the Cartesian dynamic of doubt entails. If they do, he argues, they can see that the correctives hinge on the Cartesian dynamic of skepticism. It is because of Gottlieb's astute comparison of Mills' theory on barbarians and standardized testing that the sameness of the justification of forceful practices in order to upgrade a group that a Cartesian observer sees as savage or unequal in capacities can be easily spotted in the discussed educational correctives.

Gottlieb subsequently recommends that there is potential in the Pyrrhonian procedure of doubt in overcoming racial injustices on the grounds that the Pyrrhonian procedure is simply one of looking again, and of being ready to see things differently, to respond anew to the heretofore unnoticed plenitude of the world.

In this paper I will argue that the problem that the author is tackling in his paper, "skepticism of the capacity of the minds of other people," persists through his analysis, his critique and subsequently through his suggestion. This argument is not an attempt to merely offer a critique. It is a genuine, reworked, and a lingering concern of mine; there are potential repercussions to engage with the similar analytical grout that have architected and cemented the current conceptual make-up of and about the world while performing a critique of that very conceptual structure.²

My expanded argument is the following: since the pillars of Gottlieb's "critique of the harm of Cartesian doubt on the colonized and racialized" are made by critics from the very canon of post-Cartesian doubt, the analysis subtly—and unbeknownst to the author—allows for the methodic doubt and the "skepticism of other [non-Western] minds" to persist. It also leads to a marginal tokenist presence of critics from whom the doubt has been cast upon. By remaining in a very particular critical conceptual architecture, Gottlieb's critique leads to a theoretically impoverished argument, which results in considering the already-elaborated-on (suggesting Cartesian doubt is a foundation of racism and racist policies) as new (itself a typical structure of perception in colonial encounters).³

I will create a question based on my expanded argument thusly: in Gottlieb's analysis of the impact of philosophical skepticism in colonialism and in

corrective policies through education, does there exist a pair of “inner eyes” (the very same pair that doubted the humanity of the encountered non-Europeans and kept them outside the definition of humanity) that is doubting whether “the doubted upon” could be theorists of the mechanisms of this particular skepticism?⁴ Here we are not talking about the absence of those who have illustrated the *consequences* of the doubt, but the absence of theorists who have analyzed the genesis, the operation, and the analytical vortexes of Cartesian doubt juxtaposed with modern colonial times. Wynter, Cesaire and Fanon’s presences in the analysis are almost testimonial: they are there to affirm that the non-European humans *were* indeed excluded and thingified. They are right at the doorsteps of the conceptual architecture of the critique; their analysis certify and legitimate Gottlieb’s concerns (as well as Wittgenstein’s and Taylor’s). But once we get inside the architecture, it is the domain of the European thinkers: they are sitting and theorizing about the mechanics of how, where, and why did the Cartesian skepticism go wrong.

Under the heading “Skepticism and Racial Hierarchy,” Gottlieb makes a rather swift move from “plenitude of references about modern capitalism” to the question of race in order to land a point in favor of his thesis: *comparatively little attention* has been paid to the philosophical innovations that accompanied the massive global transformation of the advent of European colonization and its intersection with race. This is while philosophical innovations about the impact and presence of Cartesian doubt in and through colonial and racialized encounters (in other words theories about the mechanics of how, where, and why did the Cartesian skepticism go wrong) are abundant.

We have Quijano who expands on how the unethical creation of new identities were premised on a particular skepticism upon encounter, a doubt about whether the Indians had souls or not:

New identities were created in the context of European colonization: European, white, Indian, black, and mestizo. A characteristic feature of this type of social classification [premiered on and solidified by Cartesian doubt] is that the relation between the subjects is not horizontal but vertical in character. That is, some identities depict superiority over others.

And such superiority is premised on the degree of humanity attributed to the identities in question.⁵

The product of skepticism in inquiries elaborated here by Maldonado-Torres (and expanded on by Charles Mills elsewhere⁶) was the following: “The ‘lighter’ one’s skin is, the closer to full humanity one is, and viceversa. As the conquerors took on the role of mapping the world they kept reproducing this vision of things. The whole world was practically seen in the lights of this logic.” In Maldonado-Torres’ critique, Cartesian skepticism—what Torres calls a misanthropic doubt—coalesced with colonial encounters and was the essence that shaped philosophical dialogues about the encountered. Maldonado-Torres’ work especially expands on how racism was in fact the ensued product:

Yet, there was a commonality between nineteenth century racism and the attitude of the colonizers in regard to differences in degrees of humanity. In some ways, scientific racism and the very idea of race were the most explicit expressions of a widespread and general attitude regarding the humanity of colonized and enslaved subjects in the Americas and Africa in the sixteenth century. I’d like to suggest that what was born in the sixteenth century was something more pervasive and subtle than what at first transpires in the concept of race: it was an attitude characterized by a permanent suspicion.⁷

A skepticism towards estranged objects nourished a misanthropic skepticism in philosophical dialogues about the encountered subjects, eventually providing the grounds for objectifying them. Unlike Descartes’ methodical doubt, “Manichean misanthropic skepticism is not skeptical about the existence of the world or the normative status of logics and mathematics. It is rather a form of questioning the very humanity of colonized peoples.”⁸ Maldonado-Torres examines how (the now-misanthropic) philosophical (Cartesian) skepticism dumps the deliberations of the differences, superiorities, and divides of the mind/body or matter/soul into the formularies of assumptions about the divides between the colonizer and the colonized. In other words, the skepticism that bolstered colonialism was a legacy of “the division between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* (consciousness and matter).”⁹

Quijano sees a subsequent legacy of Cartesian skepticism—which was itself rooted in a mind-versus-body framework—as being a development of an organicist mode of knowing which forever affected the trajectory of: the dissemination of knowledge, the essence of imagination, and the goals of education. The colonizer’s way of knowing was now to function as the *brain* for the global knowing, and the rest were to follow this knowledge: “The very relationship between colonizer and colonized provided a new model to understand the relationship between the soul or mind and the body; and likewise, modern articulations of the mind/body are used as models to conceive the colonizer/colonized relation.”¹⁰ The relationship is not just about assuming the European knowledge as the brain; equally important is the assumption of the rest—the Non-European—as the body:

[...] society as an organic structure, where the parts are related according to the same rules of hierarchy between the organs, as the image we have of every organism, and in particular the human one. Where there exists a part ruling the rest (the brain) - though it cannot expunge them in order to exist-the rest (in particular the extremities) cannot exist without being subordinately related to the ruling part of the organism. [...] Without the brain, the arms would be meaningless, and without the latter the brain could not exist. Both are necessary in order to keep the rest of the body alive and healthy without which neither the brain nor the arms could exist.¹¹

Quijano even shows how the narrative of colonized people being “the White Man’s burden” is a claptrap and an extension of this organicist image; an argument stemming from dissecting Cartesian doubt that could have become a pillar of analysis for discussions of philosophical skepticism with respect to US corrective policies in education.¹²

Lastly, in contradiction to Taylor’s diagnostic on the initial liberatory essence of Cartesian doubt, Dussel’s elaborations on philosophical skepticism upon colonial and modern encounters leads to new insights about Cartesian doubt having a hypocritical essence from the very beginning: “what was perhaps already the ‘consequence’ of Europe’s *centrality* over a world *periphery*, was instead

presented as the ‘consequence’ of rationalization, science, and the ‘modern self’.”¹³ What helps clarify Dussel’s call for looking at modernity and skepticism as a consequence of the invasion of the Americas—as opposed to modernity having taken place in Europe and as a quest for unshakable foundation for knowledge—is his argument that modern reasoning and doubt, as well as the *cogito*, did not “emerge from nothing” in 17th century Europe. He sees the initiation of methods of radical questioning and doubt in the 15th century rooted in the *certainty* of the European subjects about their own humanity and their radical doubt about the humanness of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, a certainty that itself rose from “conquering subjectivities.”¹⁴

Dussel illustrates how prior to the Cartesian formulation, there was a construction of self and other that was happening in Europe that became formative in the development of modern subjectivity and subsequent thought experiments. Dussel displays how the *cogito*, the *reasoning* self, is therefore not solely a European phenomenon, but a result of “a continuous dialectic of impact and counter-impact, effect and counter-effect, between modern Europe and its periphery.”¹⁵ Europe constitutes itself through a dialectical articulation of itself as the conquering civilized center, with the peripheral world as the uncivilized barbaric savages.¹⁶ This culminated in excessive doubt towards the humanity of people radically different from Europeans and later manifested itself in Descartes’ *cogito*. According to Dussel, Descartes was exposed to this articulation prior to his thought experiment as he went on to study at La Fleche, a Jesuit college, a religious order with great roots in America, Africa, and Asia at that moment; therefore, Dussel confirms, “the ‘barbarian’ was the obligatory context of all reflection on subjectivity, reason, the *cogito*.”¹⁷ Hernan Cortes preceded the *Discours de la methode* (1636) by more than a century.¹⁸ It is only later that Descartes creates his thought experiment in a context where the savage was already a conceptual frame.

Maldonado-Torres’ rendition of the interplay of certainty and doubt in Cartesian skepticism is worth mentioning at length:

Skepticism becomes the means to reach certainty and provide a solid foundation to the self... a certain skepticism regarding the humanity of the enslaved and colonized sub-others stands

at the background of the Cartesian certainties and his methodic doubt. Thus, before Cartesian methodic skepticism (the procedure that introduced the heuristic device of the evil demon and which ultimately led to the finding of the cogito itself) became central for modern understandings of self and world, there was another kind of skepticism in modernity which became constitutive of it. Instead of the methodical attitude that leads to the ego cogito, this form of skepticism defines the attitude that sustains the ego conquiro. I characterize this attitude as racist/imperial Manichean misanthropic skepticism. If the ego conquiro anticipates in some ways the subjective turn and solipsism of the ego cogito, then Manichean skepticism in some ways opens the door and shapes the reception of Cartesian skepticism. This point of view also leads to the idea that it would be impossible to provide an adequate account of the crisis of modern Europe without reference, not only to the limits of a Cartesian view of the world, but also to the traumatic effects of Manichean misanthropic skepticism and its imperial ethos.¹⁹

Maldonado-Torres sketches the trajectory of philosophical Cartesian skepticism, a misanthropic skepticism that doubts in a way the most obvious, and perhaps this is why it enters our realm of thinking in undetectable yet harmful ways.

As had been noted, philosophical innovations about Cartesian skepticism coalescing with colonial encounters are plenty. I cannot fathom how it is possible to conceive of the idea of rareness of such innovations in any degree unless there exists a persistent and continued skepticism of the capacity of other people's minds: a skepticism thriving off a subsequent certainty that the Post-Cartesian Euro-American conceptual architecture of critique is reliable enough and potent enough to theorize the harms of this doubt on the *doubted-upon*.²⁰ Gottlieb's inner eye of philosophical skepticism while performing a critique of it in a colonial and racial setting leads him to an inexact statement which is not minor to his analysis. This is, however, not an unpredictable outcome: the sustenance of the methodic doubt about the capacity of other peoples' minds while theorizing about the harm of the Cartesian doubt on the doubted-upon

allows for a very particular type of critique of the harm to be included.

This estrangement (having led to a marginal tokenist presence of analyses of Wynter, Fanon and Césaire), does not just result in theoretical impoverishment, or considering the already-elaborated-on as new; it affects the conception of ways to overcome injustice. It leads to an exhausted result for an otherwise magnificent surgical operation that Gottlieb offers: a return to a not-yet-fulfilled, pure-from having been contaminated by calculative and scientific veridism, but also not-yet-examined-through-history doubt for ameliorating the harms of the Cartesian one (a solution that is bizarrely almost always to be found in Greece).²¹ I am also unsure as to whether Pyrrhonian skepticism could hold up and offer a truly different potential if we are reminded of all the attempts that certain Spanish friars made to offer correctives in their intellectual and philosophical debates during colonial encounters, pleading those that upheld Cartesian doubt to see non-Western humans differently and respond to them anew.²² Pyrrho would agree if he listened to the conversation that I had the privilege to start with Gottlieb and very much learn from: his skepticism—because of the discussed points—could not be an ideal corrective for those who have had their lands grabbed and modalities of existence taken away by this mode of skepticism.

The inner eyes of philosophical skepticism here allows for the critiques of Cartesian skepticism from the critics of the same conceptual architecture as Descartes to be included, maintains the in-out hierarchy of critical concepts, and calls for a return to another skepticism as a suggestion to overcome the not-metaphorical, physical, skin-cutting, land-grabbing, genocidal, blood-ridden, head-scalping Cartesian one. However, a “remaining susceptible to being turned, to having our attention redirected or directed differently in a positive affordance” *is*, ironically, exactly what we need when we ponder how legacies of Western philosophical skepticism linger in the theoretical formulations that aim to fight the harms that the Cartesian doubt imposed on the doubted-upon.

1 Derek Gottlieb, “Philosophical Skepticism, Racial Justice, and US Education Policy,” *Philosophy of Education* 78, no. 3 (same issue).

2 Nassim Noroozi, “Novelty and Sameness: Heidegger-Inspired Critiques of

Modern Education,” *Philosophy of Education* 75, (2019): 329-33.

3 See: Dolores Calderon, “Uncovering Settler Grammars in Curriculum,” *Educational Studies* 50, no. 4 (2014): 313-338; Justin Winsor, *Christopher Columbus and How He Received and Imparted the Spirit of Discovery* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1891).

4 Charles Mills, “White Ignorance,” in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, eds. Shannon Sullivan and

Nancy Tuana (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007), 26-31.

5 Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007): 244.

6 Mills wrote: “the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality”; Mills, “White Ignorance,” 3.

7 Maldonado-Torres, *On the Coloniality of Being*, 244.

8 Maldonado-Torres, *On the Coloniality of Being*, 244.

9 Maldonado-Torres, *On the Coloniality of Being*, 244.

10 Maldonado-Torres, *On the Coloniality of Being*, 245.

11 Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” in *Globalization and the Decolonial Option*, eds. Walter D. Mignolo and Arturo Escobar (New York: Routledge, 2013), 29.

12 Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” 29.

13 Enrique D. Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity: Apel, Ricoeur, Rorty, Taylor, and the Philosophy of Liberation*, trans. Eduardo Mendieta (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1996), 34.

14 Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity*, 34.

15 Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity*, 132–133.

16 Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity*, 132–133.

17 Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity*, 132–133.

18 Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity*, 132–133.

19 Maldonado-Torres, *On the Coloniality of Being*, 246.

20 Afterall, and with respect to the suggestions to overcome troubling policies I would say, the problem lies in the perception and formulating of *alterity*; with identity (sameness) being the precursor and yardstick when en-

countering the different-than-me, and this allowing for the thingification of the encountered, and assuming reaching identity—sameness—as ideal, and therefore the legitimate grounds to formulate educational policies.

21 See for example, how Heidegger argues that an authentic mode of time—temporal stretch—is the original dimension of Aristotle’s temporality and offers a response to Bergson’s critique of the numerical discontinuous essence of Aristotelian temporality and the ensuing reductionism associated with this notion of time; Martin Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 237.

22 Lewis Hanke, *All Mankind is One: “A Study of the Disputation between Bartolomé de las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda in 1550 on the Intellectual and Religious Capacity of the American Indians”* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1974).